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HD **John Horgan invites experts to cabinet for Site C dam debate; Amid intense lobbying from both supporters and opponents of the partially built megaproject, the Premier says he needs answers to key questions before making a decision**

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WC 716 words

PD 22 November 2017

SN The Globe and Mail (Breaking News)

SC GMBN

LA English

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VICTORIA --

With B.C.'s NDP government expected to announce within weeks whether it will proceed with construction of the Site C hydroelectric dam, leading experts on both sides of the debate are being invited to deliver an 11th-hour, special briefing to cabinet.

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Amid intense lobbying from both supporters and opponents of the partially built megaproject, Premier John Horgan told reporters Wednesday he still needs answers to key questions before his government will make a decision.

Initially, the cabinet decision was expected as early as this week but new, conflicting information has pushed back the date. As construction continues, Mr. Horgan has vowed that the workers on the job site will have an answer before the end of the year.

On Wednesday in Vancouver, the senior expert retained by opponents of the dam, Robert McCullough, released a report outlining why the public would be better off with cancelling the project – even at an estimated loss of $4-billion. With the savings from cancelling the project, Mr. McCullough estimated, B.C. could build 25,000 new homes in the Vancouver area. Mr. McCullough is set to take part in the cabinet briefing on Nov. 30.

At the same hour on Wednesday, in Victoria, the pro-Site C union group, the Allied Hydro Council of BC, held a news conference to release two expert reports that reached the opposite conclusion. Economist Marvin Shaffer and lawyer Jim Quail argued that the project is too far along to quit now.

Neither Mr. Quail nor Mr. Shaffer had received an invitation to cabinet at press time. However Mark Jaccard, a professor of sustainable energy at Simon Fraser University who has argued that the project is needed to meet climate action targets, has been confirmed. Mr. Jaccard headed the B.C. Utilities Commission (BCUC) from 1992 to 1997, when the NDP was last in power.

Mr. Horgan said he is still taking in those conflicting viewpoints – more than three weeks after a final report commissioned by his government was delivered to his desk.

Construction of the Site C dam was launched by the former BC Liberal government and the project has already consumed $2-billion in building costs. After the NDP formed a minority government in July, it

directed the BCUC, an independent utilities regulator, to assess the need for the project as well as the costs of completing or cancelling Site C.

The BCUC concluded Site C is already over budget and will cost at least $10-billion to complete. (The original budget was pegged at $6.6-billion, although the figure was later raised to $7.9-billion.)

The regulator also raised doubts in its report about whether the power generated by the dam will be needed.

The reports released Wednesday by the Allied Hydro Council of BC, which represents dam construction workers, conclude the BCUC's findings were based upon "manifestly unbalanced" and "incomplete" assumptions.

Mr. Horgan acknowledged he is being bombarded with conflicting advice.

"We are collecting information, we have not yet made a decision," Mr. Horgan told reporters.

Last week, Scott Fraser, the Minister for Indigenous Relations and Reconciliation, met with each of the eight First Nations that are directly impacted by the project. His findings highlighted there are no easy answers.

"We heard early on in the process that there were Indigenous groups who were contemplating litigation should we not proceed. And we've now heard from Indigenous groups that say there will be litigation if we do proceed," Mr. Horgan noted.

The Premier added that the final report by the BCUC has also been questioned in some quarters, and cabinet has sent a series of new questions to the commission.

Within his own cabinet, there are deep divisions. The NDP's labour allies are pushing hard for the construction jobs to be maintained, while environmentalists have adamantly opposed the flooding of the Peace River valley that is required for the dam.

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